

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

HUSSEIN AND THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR:

MISCALCULATION, ESCALATION, AND MEGALOMANIA

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COURSE 5601/5602

Fundamentals of Statecraft/Military Thought and Strategy

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17 October 2000

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 17 OCT 2000		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 17-10-2000 to 17-10-2000	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Hussein and the Iran-iraq War: Miscalculation, Escalation, and Megalomania				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 23	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Strategic Analysis: Hussein and the Iran-Iraq War

Miscalculation, Escalation, and Megalomania

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.

—Carl von Clausewitz
On War, Chapter 1

Saddam Hussein miscalculated when he invaded Iran on September 22, 1980. Expecting a rapid victory that would consolidate his power and position, Hussein instead found himself drawn into a costly war of attrition with a fanatical if not overly competent enemy. As the conflict progressed over eight years, Hussein escalated from his planned limited strike to seize territory, to a war of attrition, then to a war of terror directed against the will of the Iranian people. Because Hussein did not accurately assess his adversary, and due to diplomatic, strategic, and tactical blunders, Hussein allowed his war to out-strip his initial objectives. His changes in political and military strategy, though rational by his calculus, allowed the war to become something alien to his original intention. As a result, a nearly decade long war arose from a poorly conceived land-grab with the Iraqi and Iranian people paying a heavy price.

This paper examines Hussein's conduct during the Iran-Iraq war with respect to his statecraft and military strategy. First presented are Hussein's security strategy and several contextual factors, including the international environment, assumptions, perceived opportunities, objectives, tools, and plans of action. The statecraft section culminates with an assessment of Hussein's evolving political strategy. Next introduced is classical theory, to tie the

statecraft to the military strategy. After a brief examination of the relationship of Hussein's political goals to his military objectives, this paper then explores his use of the Iraqi military as an instrument of policy. Moreover, an investigation follows assessing how the character and conduct of the war, particularly the *way* Hussein chose to fight, changed over time. Finally, this paper compares the type of conflict Hussein planned with the results of the actual war, including his shifting strategies and the resulting escalations of violence.

Statecraft and Political Strategy Perspective—Ends, Means, and Means Become Ends

Contextual Factors: Assumptions, Threats, and Perceived Opportunities

Personalities as well as the strategic environment set the stage for Hussein's decision to initiate a war against Iran in September 1980. Capitalizing on internal party politics, Saddam Hussein, the "personal protégé"¹ of Ba'th Party President Iraqi General Ahmad Hassan al Bakr, replaced the General in July 1979. Hussein, a secular Arab and despotic leader of the Ba'th party, had an ambitious nature, a desire to become a global figure, no moral restraints, and a complicated security dilemma. Hussein's conundrum was to secure his power against pressure from Shia Muslims fomenting revolution in Southern Iraq, Kurdish separatists fighting in Northern Iraq, and a large Persian neighbor to the East, who shared Iraq's only waterway to the Gulf. Hussein's ultimate concern was his own survival as President, though he aspired to increase his power and become the most influential Arab leader. Hussein measured the potential benefits of a limited offensive attack, particularly securing and expanding his power base, against his risks of attempting to maintain the status quo.

Hussein's perception of the international strategic environment influenced his approach to secure and extend his power. The political backdrop was the 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq. This agreement presented Iran with an advantage over contested territory in the

Shatt al-Arab waterway, Iraq's only water access to the critical Gulf sea-trade routes. Because of Iran's strategic position on the Shatt al-Arab and the Ayatollah's disdain for the secular Iraqi regime, Iraq's access to the Persian Gulf was subject to Iranian exploitation.

The strategic situation changed when the United States-supported Shah left Iran after a year of turmoil and revolution in January 1979. Succeeding the Shah was the fundamentalist leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. In November 1979, Iranian militants seized the United States Embassy in Teheran, pitting the US resolutely against the new Iranian regime. The embassy attack provoked global criticism of the Iranian regime, which appeared to Hussein as an opportunity to expand his authority against an unpopular enemy. When the US DESERT ONE attempt to rescue the embassy hostages failed in April 1980, a new Cold War balance emerged in the Gulf. Iran became a wildcard and Iraq had a new "enemy of my enemy," the United States.

The threat Iran presented was apparent early in Hussein's reign. Shortly after the overthrow of the Shah, the Ayatollah attempted to export the Islamic revolution to Iraq through the majority of Shia living there. In June 1979, the Ayatollah publicly urged the Iraqi population "to rise up and overthrow the Saddamite regime."² On 1 April 1980, Al Daawa activists tried to assassinate Tariq Aziz, the Christian Deputy Premier of Iraq, to avenge the execution of 97 Iranian supported activists. In April alone, Militant Shia underground organizations reportedly killed at least 20 Iraqi officials in bomb attacks. Then finally, in June 1980, three months before Hussein attacked, the Ayatollah ordered the Iraqi Shia communities to overthrow Hussein's government.³

Hussein hoped to bolster his regime's security by capitalizing on perceived instability in Iran. If Hussein could secure the Shatt al-Arab through quick military action, he would further separate his unruly Shia population from contact with the fundamentalist clerics who were

instigating in Southern Iraq. Additionally, Hussein would increase his prestige by fighting a large, unpopular Persian enemy. Therefore, Hussein hoped to capitalize on a perceived opportunity by grabbing land to increase his security.

Circumstantial evidence suggests that fear, not greed, was Hussein's prime motivation.⁴ An expanding Shia revolution was Hussein's domestic security dilemma. His attack on Iran was merely taking advantage of a window of opportunity in the fall of 1980 to address this dilemma at its source. Hussein constructed objectives, but lacked the assets as a statesman to tie them together. Hussein's goals were to retain and expand his power by seizing disputed territory while exploiting Iranian instability to curb Iraqi Shia unrest. His fear may have motivated him to exploit what seemed like a fine time for a quick strike, but he failed to integrate his military plan with his diplomatic and economic tools.

Political Objectives and Tools

Hussein possessed three principal strategic objectives at the outset of the war: control the Shatt al-Arab waterway, subdue his Shia and Kurdish populations, and to consolidate his power. Additionally, he wanted to be the most powerful Arab leader dominating traditional Persian Gulf influence. Indeed, shortly before invading Iran, Hussein boasted, "Iraq is as great as China, as great as the Soviet Union and as great as the United States."⁵ However, Hussein's strategy changed during his eight-year war, evolving in reaction to necessity rather than by purposeful design to achieve his highest priority objective, his survival and retention of power.

The Ayatollah's long-term objective was to eventually expand his fundamentalist revolution. This objective originated with a philosophy necessitating promulgation of Islamic rule over secular governments, Persian ethnic distrust of the Arabs, and a revolutionary zeal for expansion. Once attacked, however, the Ayatollah's long-term expansionist strategy became an

immediate objective: destabilize Hussein from the inside, using the nascent Shia and Kurdish uprisings as a tool. Moreover, defending Iranian holy interests against the Arab infidel aggressors became imperative to the Iranian revolutionary regime because it served as a focus for national and ethnic pride. The Ayatollah committed conventional military forces to repel Iraq, not considering negotiation an option. The Iranian objectives that emerged were: topple the Iraqi Ba'th Party and replace it with an Islamic government, maintain control over the Gulf trade routes, and retain the provisions and borders outlined in the 1975 Algiers Agreement. Once attacked, Hussein failed to anticipate the Ayatollah's ability to invigorate his populace. Instead of retreating, as Hussein had hoped, "...Iran declared full mobilization and began to fight back."⁶

Control of the strategic Shatt al-Arab was Hussein's first objective in his strategy to achieve his ultimate goal, securing his power. This vital waterway, which carries the confluent waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, is Iraq's sole connection to the Gulf and only oceanic trade route. Iraq's principal conduit to export oil was over water through the Shatt al-Arab and the Gulf. Indeed, economics was a key element of Hussein's power and access to the Gulf was critical to Iraqi trade and oil distribution, and therefore essential to maintaining Hussein's regime. In Hussein's calculus, Iran already controlled the entire eastern shore of the Gulf and the northern side of the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, the modest Gulf access the Shatt al-Arab provided Iraq was much more important to Iraq than Iran. Hussein's principal tool to maintain guaranteed access was through armed conflict, followed by a diplomatically negotiated peace.

Hussein's second political objective was to subdue the internal Shia and Kurdish populations and crush emerging revolutionary forces within Iraq. The Shia and Kurdish uprisings comprised a dangerous internal battlefield for Hussein. The Shia comprised roughly 65 percent of Iraq's Muslim population, predominantly in Southern Iraq. The Iranians reviled Hussein and

his ruling clan, who were minority Sunni Muslims. Moreover, the Ayatollah considered the secular Ba'th party anti-Islamic. By subduing his internal populace and consolidating his power, Hussein expected to purge the most dangerous elements of his internal front. His principal tool for controlling his internal populace was his fiercely loyal, conventionally armed Republican Guard, though he later introduced chemical weapons. Additionally, Hussein used a strong oil market to shield his supportive populace from the economic distress of the war, giving him more leeway to repress provincial dissent.

Hussein's third political objective was to consolidate his power and elevate his status. In Hussein's calculation, if he were successful in countering the Shia and Kurds, he would secure his power in Iraq. Moreover, once he dominated the Iranians, a traditional Arab rival and *the* prime threat for the Gulf Arab countries, Hussein would naturally ascend as a regional leader. The tools Hussein planned to employ to achieve this third objective were his army, to achieve victory on the ground, then his diplomatic arm, by retaining his gains at the negotiation table. Additionally, he hoped to exploit his economic tools once he had increased the security of his oil trade through the Gulf.

Plan of Action and Why it Changed over Time

Hussein created a strategic plan that intertwined his fears and goals, but was hampered by shortsightedness. Hussein planned first to secure his economic viability by acquiring the Shatt al-Arab. However, he did not foresee that the Iranian military might stop his offensive and that the Ayatollah would use Hussein's attack as a springboard to consolidate power in Iran. Secondly, after taking the Shatt al-Arab, Hussein thought he could strengthen his power-base while focusing on the defeat of his rebellious internal populace. He failed to anticipate the threat the synergy of the war with Iran combined with the Iraqi Shia and Kurdish uprisings portended. By

confronting Iran directly and stifling his internal threats, Hussein's myopic calculation showed him that he could not fail by engaging the Iranians in a limited war. Thus, to Hussein, a quick thrust for the Shatt al-Arab would lead to an increase in his own personal power and security.

Since the Iranians were able to successfully stagnate Hussein's advance by 1981, albeit at huge cost, Hussein reevaluated and changed his strategy. Over time, three major adaptive, escalatory strategies emerged: the Tanker War, use of chemical weapons, and a Missile War. These new strategies appear disconnected from his limited political objectives, escalating beyond his initial goals. This paper examines the military escalations in more detail later, however, diplomatic and economic components of Hussein's changing strategy are apparent.

When his offensive military strategy did not work in 1981, Hussein attempted to manipulate other instruments of statecraft. He had several unsuccessful diplomatic maneuvers, such as approaching Israel through back channels for drones and equipment and appealing for a united Arab League against Iran.⁷ In 1982, he attempted to sue for peace after unilaterally withdrawing his forces to defensive positions. Upon withdrawal, Hussein exploited the media in an attempt to gain sympathy by portraying Iraq as a victim, the last Arab bastion holding the line against Persian aggression. He successfully and skillfully engaged nationalistic spirit to defend Iraq while he insulated his populace from the war economically.⁸ Though he was frequently unsuccessful on the battlefield, Hussein broadened his use of indirect political actions while escalating militarily in an attempt to break the stalemate on the ground.

The Tanker War, begun in 1984, was Hussein's attempt to lure Iran into angering the US through provoking an extreme response to Iraqi attacks on shipping. Hussein expected that by endangering the free flow of oil through the Gulf, the West might intercede on behalf of the Iraqis. This economic manipulation was partially successful in achieving intelligence and

financial support from the United States. Because of Hussein's strategy, Washington nearly doubled its credits for food products and agricultural equipment in 1984 from previous levels.⁹

Although Hussein had unsuccessfully attempted to advance diplomatic overtures after a series of stinging defeats on the ground, Hussein's ability to exploit his military advantage by raining missiles on Iranian cities ultimately resulted in the Ayatollah initiating a diplomatic resolution to the war. By 1988, Hussein's escalations had lowered the morale of the war weary Iranian people enough that the Ayatollah was prepared to negotiate. Hussein had initially calculated that the Iranian leadership's resolve to fight was limited—so he pursued limited ends through limited means. As it became apparent that the Iranian resolve exceeded the initial limited strategy, Hussein successfully escalated to the point that the Ayatollah finally yielded.

Assessment as a Statesman

Hussein, as commander and statesman, attempted a planned military action followed by diplomatic efforts to achieve limited goals and enhance his security. However, when his military action failed to gain his territorial objectives, he shifted to political overtures to gain Arab and international support. As he gained support, he consolidated his power. Hussein initially miscalculated Iranian resolve and military capability, delaying the conclusion of a "limited" war for nearly a decade. However, ultimately, Hussein was able to manipulate world opinion and erode Iranian will to conclude the conflict while retaining his secure hold on power.

By using poison gas selectively on the Iranians, and promoting himself as representing greater Arab interests against the Islamic revolution, Hussein was able to avoid much of the international condemnation for employing weapons of mass destruction. The international community largely overlooked his poison gas attacks on the Kurds because of the perceived need to balance the Iranian threat with a relatively stable Iraq. Additionally, Hussein used the Tanker

War to prompt Iranian actions that would further alienate Iran from the West and expand Western support for Iraq.

At the conclusion of the war, Hussein had achieved some political success. He effectively held against Iranian revolutionary expansion, increased his Arab and Western support, and he demonstrated that “no sacrifice was too great to keep him in power, neither that of his armies or his civilians.”¹⁰ Hussein’s protracted war saw military action, diplomatic maneuvering, and economic manipulation. Was this war a success for Hussein as a “statesman?” Perhaps it was, simply because he retained his power. However, it was a qualified success at best because of the tremendous loss of life on both sides. To further analyze the extent of the discontinuity between Hussein’s political objectives and how he initially intended to fight it is necessary to transition to the military realm.

Statesman to War Lord—Clausewitzian Analysis Tying Political Ends to Military Means

Two classic Clausewitzian concepts are illustrative in an attempt to understand the evolution of Hussein’s war from a limited action to an eight-year war of attrition. These concepts facilitate understanding how Hussein’s escalation grew beyond his initial objectives. Moreover, Clausewitzian theory makes the subsequent analysis of Hussein’s military strategy more cogent.

The Dual Nature of War

First, Hussein’s changing strategy demonstrated the Clausewitzian proposition of the dual nature of war.¹¹ This dual nature contrasts two concepts of war: total war, characterized by unrestrained warfare between populations, and limited war, a rationed application of force designed to achieve narrow goals. Hussein planned for a limited war, but staggered toward a total war during the course of the conflict.

Envisioning a limited and decisive military engagement, Hussein expected a short war to preserve and expand his power while achieving modest gains in territory. However, as the conflict changed in character, the conduct shifted more toward absolute war. He departed from narrow battlefield objectives once his fortunes on the battlefield changed. His final War of Cities directed violence against populations through weapons designed to elicit terror not weapons of battlefield necessity. Hussein had moved from limited war to a war whose character was total.

The Clausewitzian Trinity

A second classic proposition useful in analyzing the relationship between Hussein's evolving strategy and actions is Clausewitz's concept of a trinity in war: the realms of reason, chance, and violence embodied in the government, the commander, and the populace, respectively. Clausewitz saw the conduct of war as a balance between these three spheres.¹²

As a despot, Hussein retained the roles of both the government and the commander. This was an inherently tenuous position as he was in a minority group and needed to retain power through tight controls on his military. Therefore, the policy was war—and when the war did not achieve his initially envisioned objectives, the war itself eventually became the policy. Hussein's means became his end. For example, after stagnation and defeats on the battlefield, Hussein changed his strategy in an attempt to break the stalemate. His new way of fighting eventually became an attempt to directly affect the will of the Iranian people by employing missiles designed to provoke fear rather than to achieve battlefield objectives. Hussein, because he dominated the realms of the commander and the government, had the opportunity to change the character of the war, by attacking civilians, and the conduct, by employing missiles and gas. As the center of Iraqi decision-making, Hussein submitted to neither external restraint nor contrary

opinion. Compared to Hussein's imperative to survive, his initial strategy of a limited war paled in importance.

Indeed, Hussein's military strategy exceeded his initial political goals due to miscalculation, poor tactical engagement, and deliberate escalation. This caused the conflict to become more absolute as time progressed. The marked increase in violence after 1986, including the raids on civilian shipping, the use of poison gas, and the missile war, eventually resulted in a decrease in Iranian will. The character and conduct of the war changed by design, because Hussein's need for security remained constant while he adapted to the changing situation on the battlefield. To explore this proposition, it is necessary to examine Hussein's military strategies.

Military Strategy Perspective—Ends, Means, Ways, Assessment

Military Objectives

Since Hussein's ultimate political objective was to maintain his power, it is possible to understand the derivation of his initial military objectives. Because Hussein sought a limited war, he restricted his territorial objectives to the Shatt al-Arab and a small portion of Khuzestan, the Iranian land northeast of Basra.¹³ Hussein's calculation of Iranian-to-Iraqi force ratios and his assumption of Iranian revolutionary regime instability provided the calculus through which he concluded that his limited war would last only a few weeks. The unrest in Iran and the purging of competent Iranian military leaders by the revolutionary regime would work against the Iranian will to fight a better-trained and better-equipped Iraqi army.¹⁴ Additionally, another important military objective was to maintain control of Shia Iraq and Kurdistan.

Once Hussein attacked, the Ayatollah's initial military objective became to establish and hold a defensive line, mass troops during a build-up phase, then counterattack to repel the Iraqi invaders. An additional military objective was to exploit Iranian naval superiority and blockade

Iraq, preventing oil trade and the resultant income it produced. Conveniently, the Ayatollah's long-term political objective of exporting the Iranian revolution aligned with his desire to open a second front within Iraq. This placed the Shia and Kurds as indirect military resources.

Centers of Gravity and Shifting Perspectives

Hussein originally believed the Ayatollah's tenuous hold on power and the Iranian army were the key centers of gravity. In his rapid assault, Hussein expected to overwhelm both centers through surprise, concentration, and mass. Afterwards, Hussein could simply defend the newly acquired Shatt al-Arab waterway and sue for peace. During the early course of the conflict, however, the Iraqis made tactical blunders while the Iranian's were successful in fielding huge numbers of poorly trained martyrs who were successful in blunting subsequent Iraqi assaults. Additionally, though the Ayatollah's control was tenuous at first, due to popular unrest, Hussein's attack helped the Ayatollah consolidate power. This strengthened the Iranian resolve to fight.¹⁵ The result was a stagnation of the battle, which caused Hussein to change his military strategy from seizing the initiative to fighting a strategic, defensive war.¹⁶

Hussein, when on defense, changed his view of centers of gravity after coming to the realization that negotiations were not imminent. Hussein began believing that the Iranian will was a feasible center of gravity. To affect this new center of gravity, Hussein expanded his military objectives to include naval warfare, the interdiction of merchant shipping in 1984, employing poison gas, and missile strikes against civilian targets in Iran, all deliberate escalatory moves. He apparently hoped that huge battlefield losses, stories of gas attacks, and strikes against Iranian cities would pressure the Ayatollah to negotiate.

The Ayatollah's perception of the Iraqi centers of gravity appeared to remain constant. The Iranian leaders believed that Iraq's Shia in the south, Kurdish separatists in the north and east, oil

trade, fielded forces, and Hussein himself, were centers of gravity. The Teheran regime adamantly wanted to destroy the secular Ba'th government for ideological reasons. The disaffected Shia and Kurdish populations in Iraq were a means to achieve this goal. Hussein realized the internal threat to his regime and it was a prime motivator in his rationale to attack.¹⁷

Military Capabilities, Vulnerabilities, and Hussein's Changing Strategic Concept

Though Iraq possessed a qualitative advantage in ground troops and equipment at the outset of the war, the gross balance of power tilted in favor of the Persian nation because Iran was considerably larger in population and was not land-locked. Although both countries relied on outside sources for ammunition and parts, the Iraqis had comparatively better sources for spare parts for their Soviet and Western equipment. Severe logistical problems plagued the Iranians because their revolution had disconnected them from critical American supplies while sanctions further crippled Iranian resupply efforts. Lack of parts hampered Iranian use of more sophisticated weapons systems, which suffered from frequent failures.

Though not first-rate by Western standards, the Iraqi army had more combat experience and better management than the Iranians did because the Ayatollah had purged his best military leaders in 1980. Though more fanatical, the Iranian army had meager training and it suffered from a dysfunctional command and control system. Iran maintained dual militaries, due to a struggle between the Ayatollah and Army Commander-in-Chief Abolhassan Bani-Sadr. The result was a regular army plus a separate revolutionary guard militia designed to protect the revolutionary regime *from* the army. Though both armies fought, the Iranian ruling clerics considered the regular army politically unreliable. Conversely, Hussein personally controlled the war through his Revolutionary War Council, where his generals directly represented their

services. This provided simpler, centralized decision-making, which acted as a force multiplier for Iraq.¹⁸

The balance of forces and types of military power used changed over time. Iraq initially used armor successfully in breaching Iranian defenses, but because of poor combined arms tactics and insufficient infantry support, the Iraqis suffered heavy losses from Iranian anti-tank ambushes.¹⁹ Quality of command emerged as an Iraqi vulnerability. As the Iraqi offensive slowed, the Iranians were also able to raise a tremendous number of recruits through the draw of religious appeals, catching the Iraqis off guard with waves of massed infantry. The result was that Iraq had to fight a *levee en masse* not a weak Iranian regular army.²⁰

Because of Hussein's initially limited goals, he chose not to attempt to destroy the Iranian army outright. Evidence of this limited strategy was that Hussein, at the outset of his venture, provided only five divisions, less than half his force, to engage in southwestern Iran.²¹ His mistaken assumption was that the Iranian leadership would not want to increase their vulnerability through sustained combat.²² The objectives of obtaining a small gain in territory appeared achievable based on a purely military comparison of assumed Iranian capabilities, particularly after losing US military support. To achieve his limited ends, Hussein envisioned using primarily counterforce attacks to avoid threatening the Iranian revolutionary regime directly.²³

After blunting the Iraqi attack in 1981, Iran took the offensive. The Iraqis used adequate armor battle tactics, but "the push of massive Iranian numbers began to turn the tide."²⁴ Although technologically and tactically superior to the Iranians, the smaller size of the Iraqi force became a vulnerability in the emerging war of attrition. Iraq changed from aggressive tank tactics to a desperate attempt to hold strategic defenses without proper equipment or training for

the role. Because of this reversal in battlefield fortunes, Iraq proposed peace through negotiations in February 1982.²⁵

With Iraq defensive and appearing weak, particularly as substantiated by the timing of their diplomatic overture, Iran responded with a ground offensive. After a tremendous loss with the fall of Khorramshahr, Hussein unilaterally withdrew from Iran and established defensive positions in Iraq.²⁶ Hussein was then able to portray himself as the last hope of the Arab world holding the line against the Persian menace. This exploitation of image increased economic support from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, further strengthening Hussein's position. Though suffering humiliating tactical losses, this was the point where the war became the ends as well as the means of securing Hussein's hold on power. Territorial acquisition and the objective of a limited war declined in relative importance.

After a change to defensive ground tactics and a failed peace gambit, Hussein looked for an increasing military advantage to bolster his political and economic gains. Subsequently, Hussein adopted an indirect approach by initiating the Tanker War in early 1984. This new military strategy did not complement Hussein's limited objectives, but it did support his new objective: provoking Iran to an extreme response. Craftily tying manipulative statecraft to his military execution, Hussein took actions against tankers in the Gulf to goad Iran into an excessive reaction, perhaps the closing of the Strait of Hormuz. This, he hoped, would force the Western powers, especially the United States, to intervene. Though attacking the tankers in the Gulf was an indirect approach, it definitely exceeded Hussein's limited objectives in the Shatt al-Arab.

Recognizing Hussein's provocation for what it was, the Iranians managed their reactions incrementally. Iran accelerated attacks on Iraqi shipping, attempted to gain Soviet support, deployed Silkworm missiles, and sowed naval mines.²⁷ These Iranian escalatory responses

eventually created a confrontation with the United States, though not as extreme as Hussein desired. In the end, Hussein achieved his objective when the US offered intelligence and other limited assistance to Iraq.

The use of chemical weapons by Hussein provides more evidence in the shift of military objectives and strategy, irrespective of initial political objectives. After two years of stalemate, Hussein gradually escalated to chemical attack. Hussein initially withheld his chemical weapons not because of moral considerations but because he did not want to antagonize his Arab supporters. He was particularly sensitive to the perceptions of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, who provided him with critical resources during the Iranian blockade. Evidence also exists that the Soviets diplomatically pressured Hussein to “avoid any irrevocable escalation of the war.”²⁸

Hussein began with tear gas, after issuing warnings, during an Iranian thrust into Iraq in mid-1982. Hussein escalated this strategy in 1988 when he used nerve gas against front line Iranian troops and mustard gas against logistic, command posts, reserves and preceding attacks.²⁹ He appeared to use the chemical agents to stem the Iranian advantage of overwhelming numbers by disabling troops and by influencing Iranian morale. However, with the Kurds, a population less likely to provoke Iranian retaliation or Arab condemnation, Hussein was more liberal in the use of gas. For example, aircraft dropped gas on a Kurd town in March 1988 killing 5,000, many of whom were civilians.³⁰ The effect desired was not only to kill Kurds but also to elicit fear and compliance within his borders.

Like his use of ground and chemical forces, Hussein’s use of air power also changed during the course of the war. Though Iraq maintained air superiority, both countries appeared to value their fixed wing air forces more as “fleets in being” than useful coordinated service arms. It appears both sides perceived their air forces to be more useful as deterrents than as actual combat

elements, fearing to risk them through frequent use in battle.³¹ Though Iraq and Iran doctrinally professed that the primary mission of the air force was to assist the army, they rarely used aircraft to support ground operations due to the risk of losing their limited number of aircraft.³² Since Hussein considered his aircraft and his few capable, Soviet-trained, pilots high-value resources, he turned to missiles as a viable and less costly air power option.

Iran reached its culminating point in 1987 after spending its forces against strongly held Iraqi defenses at Basra for over a year. This provided Hussein with a new opportunity to change the conduct of the war through the introduction of missiles targeted against population centers. This change in conduct ultimately reflected the new character of the war when Hussein made Iranian civilians frequently targets of attack. Though Hussein used missiles as early as 1984, the 1987-88 “War of the Cities” was more effective at undermining Iranian will because war weariness, particularly caused by the huge losses sustained during the Basra offensives, made the missile attacks even more objectionable to the Iranian population at large.

In 1987, Hussein began to use SCUD missiles effectively as long-range artillery to batter Teheran and other Iranian cities.³³ Being unable to defend against the missile attacks, the Iranian populace became demoralized. This demoralization affected the Iranian society as well as the Iranian army. Hussein’s success in attacking the Iranian population was first apparent by reduced recruitment rates for Iranian martyrs. The Ayatollah’s final peace overtures reflected the declining popular will to continue the war.³⁴

Strategic Concept Analyzed with Respect to Actual Results

The will of the Iranian populace, itself, was not the center of gravity that brought the Iranians to the negotiating table. The key was ultimately the will of the autocratic Ayatollah—though perhaps *influenced* by the loss of will of his people. “Only when the aged ayatollah

himself became convinced that the war's continuation would lead to complete alienation of the Iranian people did he agree to end the fighting in July 1988.”³⁵ The missiles combined with Iraqi ground successes resulted in the loss of will of the Iranian leadership, which ultimately led to the end of the war.

Indeed, this attack on the cities turned out to be the straw that broke Iranian morale. With government employees joining citizens in fleeing Tehran en masse, the regime was paralyzed and national morale was shattered to the core. The road from there to total collapse of the military's fighting spirit was short.³⁶

Hussein envisioned a quick, limited conflict with Iran accompanied by repression of internal rebellious factions. His initial strategy was to gain land, prestige, and power through a short war. Hussein first assumed that Iranian forces, still reeling from the revolutionary decapitation of the military leadership, would crumble allowing him to sweep-in and secure territory. This would also weaken the Iranian grip on the Shia in southern Iraq. He believed this concept achievable because he predicted vulnerability in the Iranian centers of gravity, poorly led fielded forces and an unstable new Islamic regime. Unfortunately for Hussein, he actually put the Iranian leadership in a situation similar to his own, and found it difficult to fight a limited war when his adversary perceived their survival was at stake.³⁷

Hussein underestimated the power of the revolutionary regime in Iran and the Iranian people's morale. Additionally, Hussein focused on the threat to his own loss of power while failing to accurately interpret the nature of the Iranian revolution.³⁸ These factors, along with early Iraqi military ineptitude, resulted in the war's stagnation.³⁹ Because of his lack of constraints, Hussein was willing to escalate, changing the character and conduct of the war well beyond his original intent, until the will of the Iranians faltered.

Indeed, Hussein was able to retain power by changing his strategy through escalation. However, his ability to successfully shelter his civilian population from much of the economic

stress of the war enabled him to concentrate on repressing the Kurds and Shia without risking the spread of unrest. Hussein was further able to tighten his grip on power domestically by using extreme measures to repress internal opposition, such as gas attacks. Perhaps Hussein's recognition that Iran was faltering and in danger of losing its will to fight in 1988 contributed to his calculus to escalate in his ultimately successful missile war.

The primary benefit of the war for Hussein was his consolidation of personal power. Hussein was able to claim a major success after eight years of war, despite his disassociated strategies. His most serious risks were due to his initial miscalculations in Iranian fervor, resulting in the stalemate from 1981-1987. The risk was not just the external threat of a defeat by Iran, but also his internal threat. The ultimate result of Hussein's miscalculation in assessing the Iranian capability and will was the cost of several hundred thousand lives.

In some respects, the Ayatollah was Iran's own enemy, chiefly by reducing Iran's chance of success through purging its professional military leadership while alienating itself from most of the world during the Iranian hostage situation. These Iranian disconnects between strategy and actions proved detrimental, though Iranian efforts in the Gulf and selected mass offensives did achieve some limited, temporary gains. Finally, the Iranians could not keep up with Hussein's evolving escalatory strategy. Ultimately, because of the need to retain popular support for the Islamic revolution, the Ayatollah was sensitive to the population's loss of will.

In the end, although his human and material costs were high, Hussein achieved some significant political gains. He successfully portrayed himself as "the reasonable and progressive Arab leader confronting the tide of irrational and fanatical hordes from Iran, whose openly stated policy was to export their Islamic Revolution."⁴⁰ The other Arab Gulf states provided him with military and political support out of fear of Persian hegemony and fundamentalist revolutionary

expansion. The West was nominally supportive of Hussein's Ba'th regime, considering Hussein a tolerable despot who could serve as an acceptable balance to Iranian power in the Gulf.

Additionally, his Kurdish and Shia populations were subdued. Hussein had salvaged a poor strategy and, through escalation and a willingness to selflessly sacrifice his subjects, consolidated his own personal power.

Conclusion

Hussein's initial calculation of the resolve and capabilities of Iran was inaccurate. More importantly, his changing political goals led to a discontinuity with his original narrow military objectives. Failures on the battlefield and internal unrest led to Hussein's escalations, which far exceeded his initial, limited political and military objectives. The cost was high. Hussein's gains were for Hussein personally, not for Iraq as a nation. Indeed, Hussein's need for personal regime security came at a high cost in lives and earned him a dubious international reputation for his use of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, that was all rationalized as acceptable to some international political realists, in a pragmatic sense, so Hussein could remain a counter to the perceived threat of Iranian hegemony and expansion of the Islamic revolution. If his ultimate desire was to maintain power and inspire fear, he achieved it.

Of course, Hussein failed to learn the lesson that calculating resolve and judging the kind of war on which he was embarking was critical *before* engaging in battle. His 1990 foray into Kuwait again demonstrated that lack of cognizance. Yet, somehow, he remains in power.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Stephen C. Pelletiere, "Iraq's Decision to Go to War," Chapter 2 in *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York, Praeger, 1992), p. 28.
- ² Efraim Karsh and Inari Rautsi, *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography* (New York: Free Press/MacMillan, 1991), p. 138.
- ³ Ibid., p. 139, 147. Also in, Dilip Hiro, "Roots of Conflict: After the Iranian revolution," in *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 35.
- ⁴ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 148.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 136.
- ⁶ John F. Antal, "The Iraqi Army Forged in the Gulf War," *Military Review* (February 1991), p. 64.
- ⁷ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 162-165.
- ⁸ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 155-157.
- ⁹ Karsh and Rautsi, p.160.
- ¹⁰ Karsh and Rautsi, p.175.
- ¹¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. And trans. Michael Howard and Peter Peret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton university Press, 1976), p. 69. Clausewitz's note of 10 July 1827 discussed the dual nature of war and his proposition that war is policy. The trinity binds these concepts in his synthesis.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 89.
- ¹³ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 210.
- ¹⁴ Antal, p. 63-64.
- ¹⁵ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 211.
- ¹⁶ William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, edited by Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), p. 38-39.
- ¹⁷ Hiro, p. 34.
- ¹⁸ Staudenmaier, p. 30-32.
- ¹⁹ Antal, p. 63-64.
- ²⁰ Pelletiere, p. 43.
- ²¹ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 148.

²² Ibid., p. 149.

²³ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 210.

²⁴ Antal, p. 65.

²⁵ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 155-157.

²⁶ Antal, p. 65.

²⁷ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 219-220.

²⁸ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 170.

²⁹ Aaron Danis, "A Military Analysis of the Iraqi Army Operations," *Armor* (November-December 1990), p. 17.

³⁰ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 219.

³¹ Ronald E. Bergquist, *The Role of Airpower in the Iran-Iraq War* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1988), p. 42.

³² Ibid., p. 48-62.

³³ Antal, p. 66-67.

³⁴ Karsh, "Military Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War," p. 218-219. The raids on shipping, the "Tanker War," began early in 1984. This was an incremental step in escalation.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 213-214.

³⁶ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 174.

³⁷ Staudenmaier, p. 47.

³⁸ Bergquist, p. 72.

³⁹ Antal, p. 64.

⁴⁰ Karsh and Rautsi, p. 174-175.